21

Medieval Islamic Amulets, Talismans, and Magic

Venetia Porter, Liana Saif, and Emilie Savage-Smith

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Magical designs are to be found on virtually every medium of material culture, including metalwork, objects carved of wood, cloth, and jewelry. Their presence highlights beliefs and practices prevalent to different degrees throughout the Islamic world, expounded by the authors of a variety of treatises devoted to magic. While the roots of many of the designs and symbols are to be found in early medieval Islam, the nature of these practices means that the same symbols continue to be used in much the same way on "magical" objects today. The chapter will begin with a brief discussion of what the term "magic" refers to within the context of Islam, then will consider aspects of the magical literature where theories of magic and its uses are put forward, before proceeding to discuss the elements of what can be termed a "magical vocabulary" and to examine traces of the magical theories preserved in medieval and some later artifacts.

What is Magic?

Magic and its traditional place in Muslim societies has most succinctly been described by Michael Dolls as "a more forceful method of supplication or a super-charged prayer" (Dols 2004: 87). There is of course good and bad magic practiced by different kinds of magicians. Licit magicians are regarded as being able to constrain the spirits by supplicating God, while illicit magicians enslave the demonic spirits and are able to enact evil deeds. Over time there has been wide-ranging debate over what is or what is not allowable in Islam. The tenth-century

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Epistles of the Brethren of Purity, known as Ikhwan al-Safa', discussed below, for example, included a polemical treatise against those who dismiss magic and oppose the "science of talismans" – that is, the use of materials, particularly metals and plants, that possess certain useful properties hidden from human understanding but evident in their effect on other creatures. To justify their advocacy of astral magic and talismans, the anonymous authors provide a history of attitudes towards magic (Ikhwan al-Safa' 2011). Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) was also concerned with magical practices and believed that human beings had the ability to influence the "world of elements" through supernatural means: "These are sciences showing how human souls may become prepared to exercise an influence upon the world of the elements, either without any aid or with the aid of celestial matters" (Asatrian 2003: 94). In the case of such practices today, there is a wide discrepancy across the Islamic world on its acceptability, much of which depends on which strand of Islam is being followed.[1]

The Literature on Magic

The regional diversity of magical practices, the involvement of the operator's intuition, and even charlatanism, make it very difficult to ascertain specific textual sources employed for the construction of individual amulets and talismans preserved today. Nonetheless, the majority of the magical vocabulary visible on talismans and other objects, old and modern, can be found in the medieval literature on magic.

The following are key texts composed in the medieval Islamic period which have direct relevance to talismanic practices. These texts were particularly influential and circulated widely; they contain magical elements in the form of descriptions of amulets or instructions on what to inscribe upon them, sometimes accompanied by illustrations, the designs of which are reflected on surviving talismans.

The Pseudo-Aristotelian Hermetica

The pseudo-Aristotelian Hermetica is a corpus comprising a number of texts that take the form of epistles and conversations between Aristotle and Alexander the Great. In them, Aristotle, based on knowledge he received from Hermes Trismegistus, instructs his royal pupil on the ways in which one may gain power from the universe, the spiritual forces that flow in it – called *ruhaniyyat* – and occult properties in natural things. Each of these texts is given strange Greek-sounding titles.[2] For example, the *Istimakhis* gives instructions for making four talismans and four amulets (*khirz*) intended to ensure military success. The *Istimatis* provides names of planetary *ruhaniyyat* that are to be called upon in various magical operations. The *Hadhitus* contains descriptions of various concoctions made from natural ingredients (*nairanjat*) to attract lovers or cause hatred. Other texts include instructions for making rings.[3] For example, one can make a ring which utilizes the

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power of the planet Mars: when Mars is in the sixth degree of Scorpio and the moon is in the eighth degree of Cancer, the form of a crowned man holding a sword is engraved on the stone, surrounded by specific magical characters. It must be set on a copper ring over which a black ram is slaughtered. Then it should be suffumigated at the beginning of the day and at the end of the night. This ring ensures victory and heals the cursed, the insane, and the sick.[4]

The dating of the pseudo-Aristotelian Hermetica is not clear, but some of its constituent texts were cited in *Rasa'il Ikhwan al-Safa'* (The Epistles of the Brethren of Purity), whose *terminus ante quem* is 937, and in *Ghayat al hakim* (The Goal of the Sage), which was written in the 950s.[5] Both texts are discussed below.

These texts were very influential and seem to be an important source for many later texts on magical practice, determining the forms of magic practiced in the Islamic medieval world and later. Ibn Abi Usaibi'a (1203–1270) mentions the pseudo-Aristotelian Hermetica in his *'Uyun al-Anba' fī Tabaqat al-Atibba'* (Major Accounts on the Classes of Physicians).[6] In the seventeenth century, Katip Çelebi (Hajji Khalifa) (1609–1657) lists in his *Kashf al-zunun* (The Removal of Doubts) "The Epistles of Aristotle to Alexander on governance and magic."[7]

The Goal of the Sage (Ghayat al-hakim) or the Picatrix

The Goal of the Sage has been described as the standard text on astrological magic and one of the most sophisticated expositions on magic (Kahane, Kahane, and Pietrangeli 1966: 574; Pingree 1980: 1). This work is a compendium, written in the 950s, containing a description of practices from diverse sources: Hermetic (namely, the pseudo-Aristotelian Hermetica), Indic, Greek, and more (Boudet 2011: 161). It was attributed erroneously to the astronomer and mathematician Maslama al-Majriti (d. *c.* 1008). This attribution is made in the *Prolegomena* (*Muqaddima*) of 'Abd al-Rahman b. Muhammad Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406), who considers it representative of talismanic magic (Asatrian 2003: 97–99; Ibn Khaldin 2000: 483, 507). Maribel Fierro (1996) compellingly argues for the attribution of this text to the Muslim *'alim* and reputed occultist Abu al-Qasim Maslama al-Qurtubi.[8] *The Goal of the Sage* was translated from Arabic into Castillian under the patronage of Alfonso the Wise sometime between 1256 and 1258, and shortly afterwards it was rendered into the Latin version now known in the West as the *Picatrix*. Its wide reception is evident in the high number of extant manuscripts (Pingree 1986: xvi–xxiii). The magic of *The Goal of the Sage* is based on the knowledge of correspondences – that is, the rules of sympathy or antipathy among animals, plants, minerals, even colors and scripts, on the one hand, and celestial/spiritual entities on the other. The magic of this text can be considered astral, natural, and spiritual. The operator in this case needs to have a vast knowledge of planets, signs, and lunar mansions in addition to information on all kinds of animals, plants, and minerals that correspond to the powers of the celestial bodies. The magician also employs symbols and magical scripts including

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the lunette sigla, a script from late antiquity consisting of combinations of short lines ending in tight curls or loops, thought to originate in Jewish magic, and discussed further below.[9] For example, to attract a lover, the symbols shown in Figure 21.1 are to be inscribed onto a piece of cloth in the day and the hour of Venus with the ascendant being the second decan (a 10° division of a zodiacal sign) of Taurus and occupied by Venus. Then the edge of the cloth is to be burnt as the name of the lover is spoken aloud (pseudo-Majriti 1933: 104–105).

The author created a list of materials and their occult properties, claiming he had received this knowledge from a ledger excavated from a temple constructed in the time of Cleopatra. For example, pure emerald causes the eyes of a snake to fall out instantaneously. The skin of large cats such as lions alleviates recurrent fever if sat on. The excrement of elephants, if hanged on a tree or a woman, causes infertility (pseudo-Majriti 1933: 396–397, 400). Moreover, some magical operations require addressing *ruhaniyyat* (spiritual forces) with rituals and invocations. Specific names are given to these spiritual beings taken from the pseudo-Aristotelian Hermetica. For example, the principal *ruhaniyya* of Saturn is called Brimas, who in turn has constituent parts: the upper part is a *ruhaniyyat* called Tus, the lower part is called Khrus, dextral Qayus, and sinistral Daryus, the front part is Tamis and the back part is Drus.[10] The *ruhaniyyat* are not the only spiritual beings related to the planets, for elsewhere angels are listed with their own appropriate invocations, rituals, and symbols. For example, if the powers of the sun are sought then the operator must fast seven days, beginning and ending on moon days, slaughter a small calf, eat the liver, and then recite, "Oh Bayel, angel assigned to the shining Sun, the benefactor of the world, of perfect light and luminosity, bringer of happiness and bad fortune, beneficial and harmful, by the name of the Master of the higher firmament, may you do so and so for me." The operator then must create a talisman that contains the symbols, mainly lunette sigla as shown in Figure 21.2 (pseudo-Majriti 1933: 233, 308).

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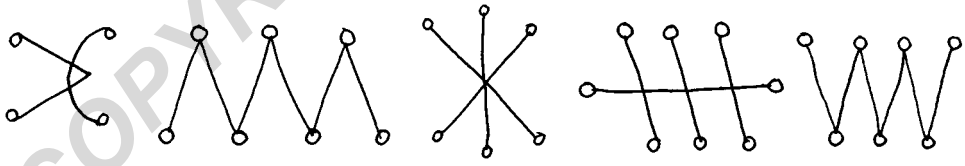

FIGURE 21.1 Authors' reproduction of symbols from *The Goal of the Sage* to be inscribed on a cloth in order to attract a lover. Source: pseudo-Majriti 1933: 104–105.

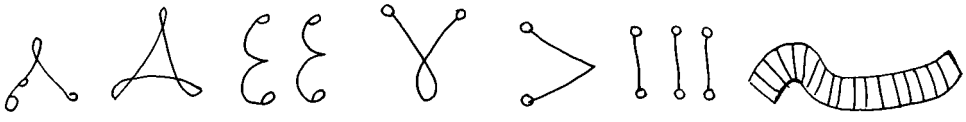

FIGURE 21.2 Authors' reproduction of symbols from *The Goal of the Sage* associated with the angel Bayel assigned to the sun. Source: pseudo-Majriti 1933: 233, 308.

Nabatean Agriculture *of Ibn Wahshiyya*

One of the rituals in the *The Goal of the Sage* containing a planetary prayer, namely for Saturn, is taken from the *Nabatean Agriculture (al-Filaha al-nabatiyya)* of Ibn Wahshiyya (fl. tenth century) (pseudo-Majriti 1933: 230–232; Ibn Wahshiyya 1993–1998: I, 9–12; Pingree 1980: 2). The author of *The Goal of the Sage* confirms that *Nabatean Agriculture* is one of the works in which one finds instructions for creating "wondrous compounds that diffuse the effects of the planets," and indeed the entire seventh chapter of Book Four of the *The Goal of the Sage* is based on the descriptions of the occult properties of plants found in *Nabatean Agriculture* (Majriti 1933: 179, 359–396).

Nabatean Agriculture claims to be a translation from ancient Syriac into Arabic by Ibn Wahshiyya, in the year 291 (903–904). It is described as containing the knowledge of the Chaldean Nabateans *(al-nabat al-kisdaniyyin)*, that is Babylonians, as well as material on various aspects of agriculture, planets/plants correspondences, and speculations on astrology. It is a composite work, based on the efforts of Mesopotamian authors: a work by a certain Saghrith, expanded by Yanbushad, and given final shape by Quthama. The large number of manuscripts dating up to the nineteenth century attests to its huge influence (Hämeen-Anttila 2006: 10, 189; Ibn Wahshiyya 1993–1998: I:1, 3).

Considerable space in *Nabatean Agriculture* is dedicated to making magical objects and talismans. Some magical operations must be done under specific astrological conditions such as the creation of talismans for the fast growth and flourishing of trees. Talismans are also made from plants. For instance, to cause illness and insanity, create an image of the victim on a branch of Myrtus and inscribe his or her name. Also draw the image of a lion, a great serpent, a scorpion, or any venomous animal surrounding the image of the victim. This is to be done under specific astrological conditions. However, not all the magic in *Nabatean Agriculture* is astrological, for, as in *The Goal of the Sage*, some is based on the occult properties of natural things. For example, to remove weeds and other harmful plants that grow around a grapevine, a farmer can mix graveyard dirt with the blood of a man or a bird and create a shape representing a person onto which his name is inscribed. After it dries, the shape is to be fixed on top of a cane with a sharp bottom. The shape is then wrapped with black wool and staked in the affected area. The harmful plants will dry up and wither (Ibn Wahshiyya 1993–1998: 50–51, 108, 147, 381; II, 1308–1309).

A number of additional texts on the occult are attributed to Ibn Wahshiyya including *On Talismans (Kitab al-tillismat)*, *On Poisons (Kitab al-sumum)*, and *Shawq al-mustaham fi maʿrifat rumuz al-aqlam*, known as *Ancient Alphabets and Hieroglyphic Characters* (discussed further below). *On Poisons* contains many recipes that can be considered magical, a great part of which are aggressive, such as the instructions found in the chapters on the preparation of things that kill people by sight and sound. Some of these require astrological knowledge and

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also include planetary invocations (Hämeen-Anttila 2006: 361; Ibn Wahshiyya 1966: 10–11, 32–38).

Though it cannot be attributed to Ibn Wahshiyya with certainty, *Ancient Alphabets* circulated under his name. It describes and claims to decode ancient alphabets many of which are magical scripts used in talismans and useful for attracting *ruhaniyyat*. An example is the script of the wise man Qalfatrius (Ibn Wahshiyya 1806: 33, 35) (Figure 21.3), reminiscent of the lunette sigla found on some surviving talismans (Porter 2011: 173) and the design in Figure 21.1 and Figure 21.2.

Ikhwan al-Safa' (The Brethren of Purity)

A source used by al-Qurtubi, author of *The Goal of the Sage*, was an encyclopedia of philosophical, scientific, mystical, and occult ideas composed by the Ikhwan al-Safa' (The Brethren of Purity) and known as *The Epistles (Rasa'il)* (Pingree 1980: 2). The Brethren of Purity were an anonymous coterie active in tenth-century Iraq. Occult thought permeates the entire work, although they dedicated the fifty-second epistle to the subject of magic and talismans. In this epistle's manuscript tradition there appears to be two versions: a shorter version (52a) and a longer one (52b).[11] The shorter one contains a discourse on the legitimacy of magic according to the Qur'an and other sources, in addition to an account of the doctrines, practices, and rituals of the Sabeans of Harran. Practical instructions are lacking in this version. In the longer version large parts are also dedicated to the legitimacy of magic, but unlike the shorter version, it actually contains practical elements. For example, we find a description of the lunar mansions and the kinds of operations to be performed under each of them; this is a list taken from the pseudo-Aristotelian Hermetica, specifically the text entitled the *Ustutas*.[12] In some manuscripts of the longer version we also find instructions for making concoctions or *nairanj*s that attract all kinds of animals to the operator. These too are taken from the pseudo-Aristotelian Hermetica.[13] Both versions, however, present magic as a part of wisdom, even its culmination. The Brethren describe a type of magic which relies on the agency of *ruhaniyyat*, whose actions are apparent but whose essences are hidden (Ikhwan al-Safa' 2011: 91–92). Like the *ruhaniyyat* in the pseudo-Aristotelian Hermetica and *The Goal of the Sage*, they are ontologically connected to the celestial bodies; moreover, they correspond with angels. In the tenth chapter of Epistle 20, the Brethren mention the *ruhaniyyat* of the planets, their counterparts in the human body and corresponding angels. For example, the *ruhaniyyat* of the sun control the wholeness and completeness of the universe and they correspond with the innate heat in the body; the corresponding angel is Israf'il (Ikhwan al-Safa' 2013: 49–50, 307–312). Elsewhere in the *Epistles*, not in the fifty-second chapter, the Brethren describe magical squares; for example, they recommend the 3 × 3 magic square as an aid to women in childbirth when it is written on two ceramic pieces that were never touched by water and then hung on a woman in labour.[14]

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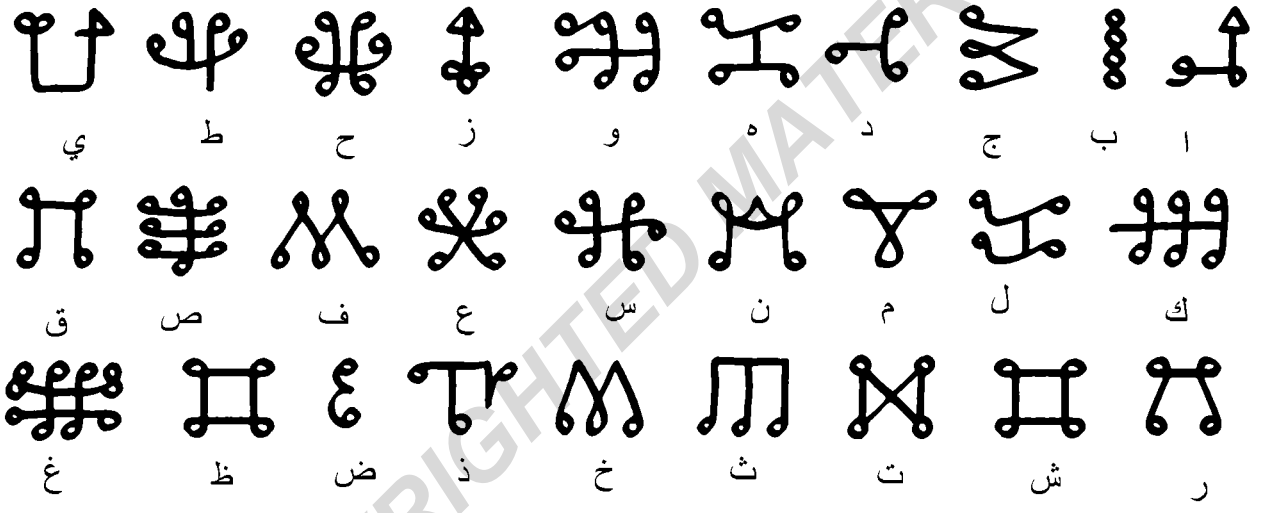

FIGURE 21.3 Authors' reproduction of magical alphabet of Qalfatrios from *Ancient Alphabets* and hieroglyphic characters attributed to Ibn Wahshiyya. Source: Ibn Wahshiyya 1806: 33, 35.

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The Secret of Secrets

The pseudo-Aristotelian *Secret of Secrets* (*Sirr al-asrār*) forms the final part of a longer epistle said to be from Aristotle to Alexander the Great offering political, moral, and dietary advice. The work itself claims in the proem to be a translation from Greek into Syriac then into Arabic by the ninth-century Baghdadi translator Yaha ibn al Bitriq, although there is insufficient evidence to support the existence of a Greek original (Badawi 1954: 69). Moreover, many passages in the *Secret of Secrets* are taken from the *Epistles* of the Brethren of Purity (Ebstein 2013: 210–212). One of the most interesting sections in this work is concerned with the wondrous "King's talisman," which supposedly brings power to the operator and inspires fear and awe in the people who encounter it; moreover, it repels harm. Under very strict and complicated astrological conditions, a ring is to be made on a Thursday morning from a piece of red ruby on which is inscribed an image of a crowned yet hairless winged man, riding a lion and holding a flag, in addition to six hairless men prostrating between the man's hands. Other materials are inscribed with names of planetary intelligences or spirits and inserted in the ring. It should be suffumigated in a very elaborate ritual which includes an invocation of the sun. As a result a *ruhaniyya* will visit the operator in a dream confirming the success of the ritual. Other talismans are described for repelling snakes and scorpions and for pacifying a storm (Badawi 1954: 156, 159–164).

Al-Sirr al-Maktum (The Concealed Secret), and Kitab al-Shamil wa al-bahr al-kamil (The Comprehensive Book and the Complete Sea).

Al-Sirr al-Maktam is attributed to the theologian and philosopher Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (1149–1209). It is concerned with astrology and magic, which is largely planetary drawing from the pseudo-Aristotelian Hermetica and other sources of astral magic.[15] Many sections are dedicated to the construction of talismans and magical concoctions for love, harmony, sexual excitement, and other purposes.[16]

Kitab al-shamil wa al-bahr al-kamil (The Comprehensive Book and the Complete Sea) is similar in content and scope to The Concealed Secret. It is attributed to the Hanafi grammarian and rhetorician Abu Yaʿqub al Sakkaki (d. 1229). This text is made up of five books concerned with various magical practices: talismans according to the pseudo-Aristotelian Hermetica, rings, lamps, planetary magic and invocations, magic squares and others. The practices therein are made effective by planetary forces, here also referred to as *ruhaniyyat*, angels, occult properties of natural materials, and also the power of words, divine names of God, and mysterious scripts. An example of the practices therein: an antidote can be created by engraving on Bezoar stone, long considered to have properties that counteract poisons, the forms of a snake and a scorpion under the sign of Scorpio.[17]

It is worth noting that in The Concealed Secret and The Comprehensive Book, the *ruhaniyyat*, which are planetary spiritual forces in the pseudo-Aristotelian

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Hermetica and *Ghayat al-hakim* become explicitly associated with angels. Unlike the texts mentioned so far, here we have *jinn* and angel magic, which requires invocations, divine names, sigils, magical scripts, and complex diagrams.[18]

Hajji Khalifa attributes one *al-Shamil min al-bahr al-kamil* to Abi al-Fadl Muhmmad b. Ahmad al-Tabsi who died in 1089. This book, he tells us, is concerned with "the foundations of magic and the rules of astrology" (*usul al-taʿzim wa qawa id al-tanjim*). Al-Sakkaki's work fits the description though the incipit included in the entry is different. In another entry, a work called simply al-Shamil is attributed to al-Sakkaki but described as being concerned with "the science of the letter" (*ʿilm al-harf*), which is described below. The Comprehensive Book does include sections that correspond with this description.[19] Al-Sakkaki seems to have been known as an occultist. We learn from Ghiyath al-Din Khwandamir (d. 1535) in his *Habib al-siyar* (The Lover of Histories) that it was by means of occult forces that al-Sakkaki came into the service of the Mongol emperor Chagatai Khan (r. 1227–1242) (Zadeh 2014: 133–134). As for The Concealed Secret, Hajji Khalifa casts doubt over its attribution to al-Razi, though Ibn Khaldun considers him to be the author.[20]

The works attributed to Ahmad al-Buni

In the thirteenth century, the efflorescence of Sufism that took place led to the intermingling of magic with Islamic devotional elements. This is evident in the works of al- Sakkaki and al-Razi mentioned above but it is most clear in the works attributed to Abu al-ʿAbbas Ahmad al-Buni, who flourished in Cairo about 1225 (Francis IV 2005: 97–99; Gardiner 2012: 89). Ibn Khaldun mentions him in his *Muqaddima* as a master of letter magic (Asatrian 2003: 102; Ibn Khaldun 2000: 488–489). The occult science of letters correlates letters with the Sufi–Neoplatonic idea of an emanative hierarchy governing the universe (Francis IV 2005: 120–121; Gardiner 2012: 88) and the mastery of these letters is believed to benefit the operator spiritually and also magically (Hamadan 1985). When used magically this practice is also called *simiyaʿ*.

Unfortunately not a lot is known about al-Buni's life, but evidence suggests that he was North African and had taken instructions by Sufi masters.[21] He was considered by some as a saint.[22] He has written several treatises on the occult science of lettrism, which correlates Arabic *abjad* letters with the emanative hierarchy of the universe.[23] The mastery of which, as noted, provides spiritual and magical reward to the adept.[24] The circulation and influence of his works were first restricted to Sufi disciples and closed auditions. By the fourteenth century they became better known outside these circles and from there grew in popularity.[25] However, the fame of al-Buni today rests on the popular printed editions of a work known as *Shams al-maʿarif al-khubra (The Sun of Knowledge, the Larger Version)*, which is actually a compilation of al-Bunian occult

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practices produced in the seventeenth century.[26] Nevertheless, it made him one of the most recognized authors on magic and lettrism in the Islamic world to this day.

There are many other titles questionably attributed to al-Buni but a widely copied and consistent text known as *Shams al-maʿarif wa lataʾif al-ʿawarif* (The Sun of Knowledge and the Secrets of Gnosis) formed the basis of the *Larger Version*. This text contains anachronisms which could possibly be interpolations by students.[27] This work represents a comprehensive attempt to systematize and formalize Islamic magic in the medieval period.[28] The reformulations of *The Sun of Knowledge and the Secrets of Gnosis*, such as the *Larger Version* and others that appear in compilations and single texts across the Islamic world, can be considered the reason why a larger number of more recent talismans and amulets can be identified as "al-Bunian" due to the elements, symbols, and inscriptions elaborated in his aforementioned works (Hamès 2007).

This text elaborates the correspondences between things that will enable the operator to organize the elements of his practice towards a specific purpose. For example, each level in the cosmological hierarchy corresponds to a letter (see Table 21.1).[29]

The Throne (*al-ʿArsh*) and Pedestal (*al-Kursi*) are mentioned in the Qurʾan. God's Throne is carried by angels (Q20: 5, Q69: 17) and His Chair extends over the heavens and earth (Q2: 255). According to al-Buni, the Throne corresponds with the Intellect, the first Neoplatonic emanation, and the Chair corresponds with the Soul of the World, the second emanation. Including the celestial spheres, these constitute the higher world (*ʿalam ʿulwi*) in the cosmology of al-Buni. The author also gives correspondences pertaining to the 28 mansions of the moon, including the associated *ruhaniyyat*, psychological states, and purposes.[30]

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Table 21.1 Correspondence between letters and cosmological levels according to *The Sun of Knowledge and the Secrets of Gnosis.*

Level	*Letter*	
Throne	ا	a
Chair	ب	b
Saturn	ج	j
Jupiter	د	d
Mars	ه	h
Sun	و	o
Venus	ز	z
Mercury	ح	ḥ
Moon	ط	ṭ

Moreover, al-Buni establishes theurgic and magical uses of Islamic elements such as "the beautiful names of God" (*al-asma al-husna*) and verses of the Qur'an. For instance, a table can be constructed based on the letters in the name "Allah" (see Table 21.2).[31]

Another example is that of correspondences given for the verses of *Sura al-fatiha*, the opening chapter of the Qur'an (see Table 21.3).[32]

TABLE 21.2 Correspondence of letters, cardinal points, angels, day, and qualities according to *The Sun of Knowledge and the Secrets of Gnosis.*

Letter	ه *H*	ل *L*	ل *L*	ا *A*
Cardinal Points	South	North	West	East
Angel	Mika'il (Bounty)	Uzra'il (Death)	Israfil (Apocalypse)	Gibra'il (Revelation)
Day	Wednesday	Saturday	Thursday	Monday
Quality	Mixture	Cold Dry	Hot Wet	Cold Wet

TABLE 21.3 Verses of *Sura al-fatiha* and their corresponding days, divine names, planets, and angels according to *The Sun of Knowledge and the Secrets of Gnosis.*

Day	*Verse*	*Divine Name*	*Planet*	*Angel*
Sunday	1: In the name of the Merciful and Compassionate God.	الحي القيوم The Living The Guardian	Sun	Ruqia'il
Monday	2: Praise belongs to God, the Lord of all beings.	السريع القريب The Fast The Near	Moon	Mansa'
Tuesday	3: The Merciful, the Compassionate.	القاضي العزيز The Judge The Honourable	Mars	Thatghas
Wednesday	4: Master of the Day of Reckoning.	مقلب القلوب Turner of Hearts	Mercury	Mika'il
Thursday	5: You we serve, to You we turn for help.	الحكيم العليم The All-Wise The All-Knowing	Jupiter	Surfa'il
Friday	6: Guide us on the straight path	الرحمن الرحيم The Compassionate And Merciful	Venus	'Inya'il
Saturday	7: The path of those You have blessed, not of those against whom there is anger, nor those who go astray.[1]	القادر المقتدر The All-Powerful The Determiner	Saturn	'Azra'il

[1] *The Qur'an*, trans. Alan Jones (Exeter: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2007), Sura 1 (Al-Fatiha): 1-7 (p. 23).

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Table 21.4 The 4×4 magic square.

4	14	15	1
9	7	6	12
5	11	10	8
16	2	3	13

We also find in *The Sun of Knowledge and the Secrets of Gnosis* explanations and instructions for magical diagrams and magic squares, both numerical and letter-based.[33] A magic square is a square grid in which specific numbers are arranged so that each column, row, and diagonal adds up to the same number. One example is the 4×4 magic square shown in Table 21.4.

This square particularly was ascribed (falsely) to Plato and is one of the most popular and well known in the Islamic world (Cammann 1969: 202). It can be incorporated in rings, or soaked in rain water and honey and then consumed; it is used for chest pains, an antidote for the venom of scorpions and snakes, and for gaining bounty.[34]

Often a ritual or a "spell" is charged with a prayer. This can be an orthodox formula from the tradition of "Answered Prayers" derived from the hadith, although al-Buni also recommends invocations of *ruhaniyyat*, angels, *jinn*, and "servants," but always as entities subservient to God and actualizing the magical work by His permission, working through the cosmic letter scheme and its Qur'anic and devotional associations.

It is notable that the earlier magical texts remain largely faithful to the Neoplatonic ontology of these *ruhaniyyat*, maintaining that they are astral volitional forces that work by means of astral emanations (Boudet, Caiozzo, and Weill-Parot 2011: 19). However, with the rise of Sufism towards the thirteenth century the nature of these *ruhaniyyat* underwent a fundamental transformation from powers of a single ontological origin, that is, the celestial world manifest in the stars and planets that are studied by astrologers and magicians, to intelligent entities or spirits emerging from inaccessible mysterious dimensions known in Arabic as *ghayb* (hidden), the true knowledge known only to God. The earlier texts also emphasize that magic is an extension of the operations of nature manipulated by the magician (Weill-Parot 2011: 130–131), while the magic of al-Buni and those influenced by him implies that magic is a disruption reliant on the power of the operator. In the early medieval period this is reflected in the intermingling of magic with astrology and natural philosophy, whereas later magic was founded upon Sufi ideas, with the vocabulary of magic intermixed with religious elements (Asatrian 2003: 87–89).

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The Nature and Survival of Magical Objects and the Magical Vocabulary

The texts that have been highlighted above help us to gain an idea of the wider context for the types of inscriptions and symbols that appear on amulets and other artifacts. Amulets and talismanic objects used by Muslims appeal to God in the first instance. In this respect they differ substantially from Byzantine, Roman, early Iranian, and other pre-Islamic magic which addressed demonic forces or spirits of the dead. In other words, these objects encompass not only magical symbols but also evocations, prayers, and verses from the Qur'an, and are generally addressed to God or one of His intercessors. Their main functions are to ward off misfortune and the "evil eye," to gain good fortune, to promote healing, or to increase fertility, potency or attractiveness. Despite regional variations, what unites these objects is that they are characterized by the use of a particular and distinctive vocabulary of writings and symbols, which can appear in a variety of combinations, a vocabulary which can be said to have been formalized by the thirteenth century. This was aided by the spread of the printing press, which made this material generally more accessible to a wide range of practitioners.

In terms of the survival of such objects, there are few that can be attributed with certainty to before the twelfth or thirteenth centuries. More magical artifacts have survived from later periods and we can only speculate about the reasons for the apparent lack of material evidence of the theories and practices discussed in the early medieval literature. It could be due to the perishable nature of earlier objects such as *niranjiyat* or perhaps they were subject to corrosion, since many were made of metals. Also, many of the objects that have survived in museums and other public resources originally belonged to personal collections gathered by travelers and researchers, from as early as the fifteenth century, as curios of the cultures they visited and thus it is more likely that these objects were created nearer the time of the collectors' sojourns in these regions (Porter 2011: 19–21).

The magical vocabulary found on extant amulets and talismans can be broken down into a number of elements, the earliest surviving examples of which reflect pre-Islamic magical symbolism: a long-horned stag[35] or a remarkably stable but complex design composed of a scorpion, rampant lion or dog, a canopy of stars, and a frame of pseudo-Kufic writing which occurs on Iranian amuletic objects of the ninth or early tenth century (Figure 21.4) (Savage-Smith 1997: 138–139). The prevalence of the scorpion in the arid areas of the Islamic lands has meant that it has long been associated with danger and evil. According to the hadith, charms could lawfully be employed against them (Flood 2014: 467). At the same time, however, as a symbol the scorpion has an apotropaic function as protector "to counter the power of evil" as seen, for example, on the columns of the

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FIGURE 21.4 Clay bulla, lion facing a scorpion under star canopy, *c.* ninth–tenth century. Diameter: 2.9 cm. Source: Courtesy, Trustees of The British Museum, 1991, 0727.4.

twelfth-century Friday mosque at Ajmir or the "scorpion-man" at the entrance to the Friday mosque in Hims going back to at least the tenth century (Flood 2006: 150, 2009: 169). In Islamic literature scorpions appear as embodiments of evil (Frembgen 2004: 102). And although the motif described and illustrated in Figure 21.4 fell out of the talismanic repertoire, practices and legends surrounding the scorpion continued. There are inscriptions relating to scorpions and designs of them on magical healing bowls (Savage-Smith 1997: 74, 82–83); there is the additional association with Scorpio, the sign of the zodiac (Caiozzo 2003: 213–230, 299–300; Carboni 1997: 39ff).

From the mid-twelfth century, these early elements were joined by others, some of which are discussed in detail below. At one end of the spectrum are particular verses from the Qur'an and invocations to God or revered figures in Islam, such

as the prophets or the Shiʿi imams. At the other end, a range of mysterious signs such as the lunette script referred to above, writings and symbols, magic squares, and astrological symbols, many of which were derivatives from the Greco-Roman world. The first datable use of this vocabulary is found on magic medicinal bowls from the reign of Nur al-Din Zangi (r. in Damascus 1146–1174) where we find indecipherable magical scripts juxtaposed with other texts in *naskh* script. Other objects from about the same period, such as mirrors (see below), contain the "Seven Signs" and the names of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus (*ahl al-kahf*) – the legendary youths who slept for centuries to avoid Roman persecution and, in a further example of everyday use in the medieval period, the names of the Sleepers are invoked on a paper amulet from the thirteenth-century site of Quseir (Guo 2004: 312; Porter 2007: 127; Savage-Smith 1997: 82).

From the early medieval period on, therefore, these texts, signs, and symbols can be found not only on groups of objects such as amulets, magic medicinal bowls, or talismanic shirts but also in other contexts, placed as protective elements: an interesting resurgence of the use of the Seven Sleepers occurred under the Ottomans where they appear in contexts from architecture to calligraphy, the names sometimes turned into the form of a ship (Porter 2007). We find the engraving of the "Seven Signs" – seven magical symbols which include a hexagram – on a cistern in Yemen (Heymeyer 2008), a six-pointed star (one of the Seven Signs) placed on an Ottoman fortress for extra protection (Gruber 2013: 5), the invocation *ya kabikaj* (O Buttercup) on a manuscript as a guard against vermin, or in an Indian context as a protective invocation to the lord of cockroaches (Savage-Smith 2005; Titley 2005: xii). Locks often had amuletic designs placed upon them, many of which were connected to the tradition of placing padlocks on sacred places or tombs of saints to mark a vow taken (Stanley 1997; Torre 1989). In a particular Southeast Asian practice, magical elements were often included in the personal seals of known individuals or rulers, as though adding a layer of protection to that person and the document being stamped (Gallop and Porter 2012: 98).

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Elements of the Magical Vocabulary

Qurʾanic vocabulary

The most important component of the vocabulary is the Qurʾan itself. Two chapters (*sura*s) are regarded as particularly talismanic: al-Falaq (Q113) and al-Nas (Q114), in addition to al-Ikhlas (Q112). Al-Bukhari (d. 870), the authoritative compiler of the hadith, noted that according to ʿA'isha, the Prophet's wife, when the Prophet fell ill he would recite these three *sura*s and when he could not, ʿA'isha recited them for him (Epelboin *et al.* 2013:155 ff.; Hamès 2001). The most popular individual passages of the Qurʾan are the "Fatiha," the opening verses, and the "Throne Verse" *(ayat al-kursi*) (Q2: 255), which is also

known as the "verse of seeking refuge" or the "verse for driving out Satan" (Canaan 1937–1938: 75; O'Connor 2004; Savage-Smith 1997: 61–62). There are, in addition, verses that were used particularly for healing: an amulet in the British Museum is inscribed with each occurrence of the word to heal in the Qur'an. To strengthen its healing potential further it includes the 3 × 3 *buduh* square (see below), which has strong associations with healing (Porter 2011: 171 no. A127). There is also a body of literature known as the *Fada'il al-Qur'an* (Merits of the Qur'an) which emerges in the medieval era and talks about the benefits of reciting certain *sura*s in particular circumstances. For example, as regards Al 'Imran (Q3), "If you write it with saffron and you have it worn as an amulet by a woman who wishes to become pregnant, she will by the grace of God" (Hamès 2001: 87). On the basis of a corpus of paper amulets from Senegal, Hamès discusses the deployment of certain passages from the Qur'an for particular circumstances, ranging from stopping hemorrhages to making a person attractive to another (Hamès 2001: 90ff).

Also strongly associated with the Qur'an are invocations to particular revered figures: the Prophet Muhammad of course, and the Hebrew Prophets mentioned in the Qur'an, who are believed by Ibn Khaldun to be able to perform miracles (Asatrian 2003: 83ff), including Moses (Musa), Abraham (Ibrahim), Ishmael (Isma'il), and Solomon (Sulayman). In addition to this there are the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, mentioned above, whose story is told in the Qur'an (Q18: 9–26), although their names are not mentioned there. The names of the Archangels are frequently inscribed around the sides of the magic squares. Derived from Hebrew angelology, they are known as "the sultans of the angels" (*al-salatin al-mala'ika*) and are each believed to be endowed with special gifts and functions: Jibra'il (Gabriel), the messenger to the Prophets through whom the Qur'an was transmitted; Mika'il, who presides over rain and plants; Israfil, who stands beside the throne guarding the heavenly trumpet; and Azra'il, the angel of death. Names of other angels, playing different roles such as guarding particular days of the week, also appear on amulets, as do strange words, whose ending *il* indicates that these are also the names of angels (Canaan 1937–1938: 81–83; Porter 2011: 166 ff).

Another important element of the magical vocabulary are "the beautiful names of God," or the "ninety-nine names of God" as they are often referred to, and the subject of an entire treatise by al-Buni. The appellation "the beautiful names" comes from the Qur'an (*Ta-Ha'*, Q20: 18): "There is no God but He to Him belong the beautiful names." Although traditionally believed to comprise 99 names, after the hadith attributed to Abu Hurayra, "God has ninety-nine names, one hundred less one, and whoever enumerates them will enter Paradise" (Gardet *EI*²)[36] there are in fact closer to 400 names in all and the list has never remained completely fixed. Also popular and listed on

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amulets were the names of the Prophet Muhammad (Blair 2001: 87–88; Redhouse 1880).

Letter Magic and Magical Alphabets

By employing the magical properties of the letters themselves, it was said that one could sometimes control angels, celestial spirits, and the *jinn*. Letter magic, known as *ʿilm al-huruf* (the science of the letters), can be considered the second main major element of the magical vocabulary.

ʿIlm al-huruf may have initially developed in a Shiʿi milieu, with the Shiʿi imam Jaʿfar al-Sadiq (d. 765) said to have played a major role (Macdonald *EI*²). It spread into Sunni and Sufi contexts in the ninth century and developed into a Sufi science by the thirteenth century. It then went in two different directions: the first being the subject of mystical speculations found in works of mystics, such as Ibn ʿArabi (d. 1240); and the second developed in books about magic like the much-cited works of the latter's contemporary, al-Buni (Lory 1989).

Therefore, letters appear extensively on amulets and other talismanic objects. There are particular groups of letters that have significance, notably, the "mysterious letters of the Qurʾan." These are the 14 letters that appear singly or in groups at the beginning of 29 of the *sura*s of the Qurʾan and referred to as *al-huruf al-muqattaʿa* or *al-huruf al-fawatih*,[37] the meaning of which has been a subject of debate since early Islam (Massey 2001; Seale 1978).

Letters of the alphabet were also grouped according to the four elements (fire, air, earth, and water) and were frequently represented by numerals using the alpha-numeric system known as *abjad*, mentioned above, the old Semitic order of the alphabet which begins *alif*, *ba*, *jim*, *dal*, and hence its name. On some amulets letters are combined with numerals. In a further appearance of the Arabic letter, rows of individual letters are often repeated, while short texts, such as the *basmala* or some of the names of God, are written in isolated form (with unconnected letters) which is believed to enhance the power of the amulet. It is particularly common to find the use of simple unembellished Kufic script on talismanic objects harking back to an early use of Kufic in magic (Porter 2010). On magic medicinal bowls for example, they appear in cartouches juxtaposed with legible inscriptions in *naskh* script. There are also groups of amulets with letter strings in a style, which Rehatsek described as "Linear Kufic" (*kufique linéaire*), and which are sometimes inscribed on amulets in reverse. Rehatsek also identified such letters as associated with angels and their perfumes (Porter 2011: 175ff.; Rehatsek 1880; Savage-Smith 1997: 86).

Moreover, inscriptions bearing ancient languages and scripts were sometimes reused for talismanic purposes, or such scripts were employed on talismanic objects, possibly due to the belief that using words of foreign origin – Hebrew, Syriac, or Greek, for example – were more efficacious than Arabic (Gonella 2010). Some amulet makers employed texts such as that of Ibn Wahshiyya's *Ancient Alphabets*,

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especially the so-called lunette script (Figure 21.1, Figure 21.2, Figure 21.3). The sigla illustrated in the texts of Ibn Wahshiyya and the The Goal of the Sage frequently appear on talismanic discs, where they are combined with other elements of the vocabulary (the *basmala* in individual letters, for example); they also occur in manuscripts of the Ottoman period and on talismanic shirts (Gruber 2013: 3; Savage-Smith 1997: 110). An example of these "scripts" on a talismanic plaque placed around the figure of Solomon is illustrated in Figure 21.5.

Magic Squares

Magic squares also became an important part of the vocabulary of talisman makers and compilers of magical manuals, particularly after the thirteenth century (Savage-Smith 1997: 60). The only magic square employed on amulets prior to the thirteenth century was the simple 3 × 3 design having nine cells in which the letter/numerals from one to nine were arranged so that every row and every column as well as the two diagonals had the same sum: 15. This ancient magic square (possibly of Chinese origin) was given its own special name of *buduh*, derived from the four letter/numerals that are placed in the corner squares (the letters b = 2, d = 4, w/u = 6, and h = 8). So potent were the magical properties of this square that the name itself, *buduh*, acquired its own occult potency. Thus, when one did not wish or know how to write the magic square, one could invoke it against stomach pains, temporary impotency, or even to become invisible, by writing or saying *ya buduh* (O buduh). That it was known and invoked from at least the tenth century is clear from a reference in the tenth-century *Epistles* by the Ikhwan al Safaʾ, which advocates it as an aid to women in childbirth if it is written on two ceramic pieces that were never touched by water and then hung on a woman in labor (Ikhwan al-Safaʾ 2008: I, 112). It featured extensively in the writings of al-Buni, and the 3 × 3 design continued to be used for centuries, often associated with the names of the four Archangels and placed within a larger design as in Figure 21.6.

Magic squares as large as 28 × 28 are described in the anonymous twelfth-century *Album of Harmonious Numbers (Diwan al-ʿadad al-wafq)* that also provides a remarkable history of magic squares (British Library, Delhi Arabic MS 110, analyzed in a forthcoming study by Bink Hallum). In recent centuries, magic squares as large as 100 × 100 occur on talismanic charts (Savage-Smith 1997: 110–115). The literature on true magic squares is extensive, for it has attracted the attention of historians of mathematics and puzzles. Yet the focus of virtually all the scholarly literature has been upon the mathematical methods of creating magic squares of higher order, rather than upon their magical significance or their role in popular culture (Cammann 1969; Sesiano 1996, 2003).

In a magical context there were also squares that on first sight appear to be "magic squares" but in fact lack the required mathematical properties. These fall into two categories: the so-called Latin square (in Arabic, *wafq majazi*,

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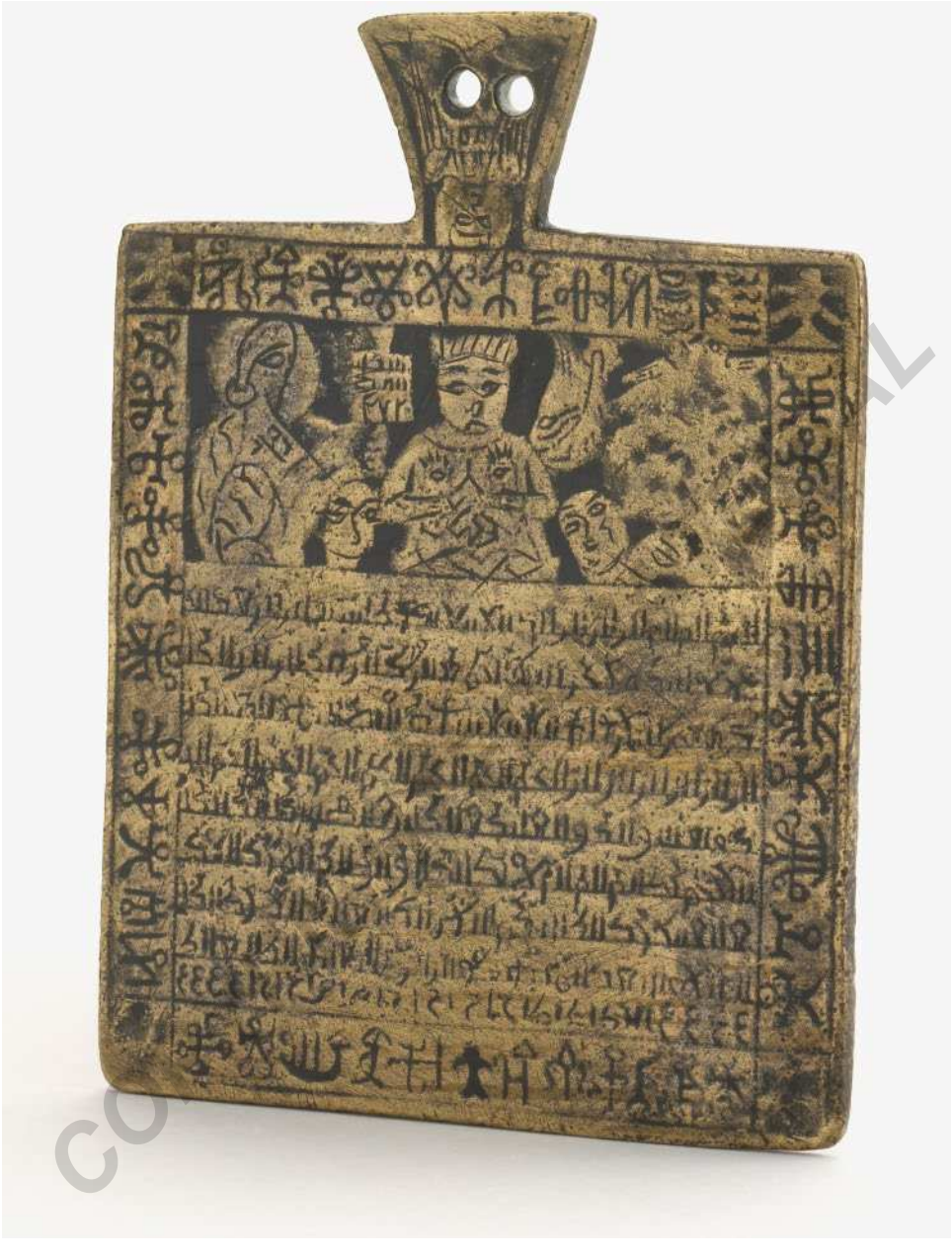

FIGURE 21.5 Brass talismanic plaque with magical scripts and the seated figure of Solomon, *c.* nineteenth century. 11.5 × 9.0 cm. Source: Courtesy, Trustees of The British Museum. OA.+ 2606.

FIGURE 21.6 Brass seal with 3 × 3 magic square, *c.* nineteenth century. 27.0 × 2.5 cm. Each of the numbers has had 39 added to it, totaling 1185. In the *abjad* system this makes up the invocation *ya ism al-Aʿzam* (O greatest name [of God]). Source: Courtesy, Trustees of The British Museum 1893,0215.3.

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"false magic square") and the "verse square." In the former, each row and each column contain the same set of symbols (be they numerals, letters, words, or abstract marks), but with the order of the symbols differing in each row or column. In the "verse square" the cells of the square are filled with words or phrases, but not arranged as in a Latin square. Rather, in each consecutive row one word is dropped on the right side and a new one added on the left until the entire selected verse (usually from the Qurʾan) is worked into the square (Savage-Smith 1997: 58–59, 106–107).

Zodiacal Motifs and the "Seven Signs"

From the thirteenth century onward, the repertoire of the amulet maker encompassed a further number of distinctive designs, including some astrological iconography derived from classical antiquity (usually anthropomorphized representations, adapted to Islamic iconographic conventions, of the zodiacal signs and the seven classical planets). These signs with accompanying texts can sometimes be found on magical bowls, for example, where they are combined with the other elements of "the vocabulary" (Spoer 1938). Occasionally, bowls or other objects have inscriptions stating that they were produced under particular zodiacal signs or planetary risings (Flood 2014: 478; Savage-Smith 1997: 82), thus maintaining an earlier textual tradition that emphasizes the need to observe the appropriate astrological conditions in making magical objects, as discussed above in the case of the The Goal of the Sage and the *Secret of Secrets*.

Another common design is a row of seven magical symbols, one of which is a five-pointed star (or pentagram), or sometimes a hexagram, traditionally called the "Seal of Solomon" (Figure 21.7). The seven magical symbols together represented

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FIGURE 21.7 Carnelian amulet inscribed with the "Seven Magical Signs." 1.5 × 1.2 cm. Courtesy, Trustees of The British Museum 1878 12–20 68.

the sigla of God's Holy Name, though historians have sometimes confusingly called them the "Seven Seals of Solomon" (Dawkins 1944: 146; Doutté 1909: 156–157). Pseudo-al-Buni described these signs as follows, invoking the letters *mim*, *ha'*, and *waw* of the Arabic alphabet:

> three sticks are lined up after a seal, at their head is a bent head of a lance, a *mīm* squashed and amputated, then a ladder which leads to every hoped-for object but which is nonetheless not a ladder; four objects resembling fingers have been lined up, they point towards good things but (they are) without a fist, a *ḥa'* in half then a *wāw* bent over like a tube (*unbūb*) of a cupper (*hijam*) but which is not a cupping glass. (Anawati 1966: 24–27)

The "Seven Signs" are found accompanying other elements of the vocabulary from early medieval times and continue to be used today inscribed on the paper amulets from Senegal where many other of the elements of the vocabulary (magic squares, and so on) also appear (Epelboin *et al.* 2013: 214).

Categories of Objects

Amulets

The term "amulet" is interchangeable with the term "talisman," which derives from the Greek word *telesma*.[38] Other terms include *hirz* used in the Maghrib mostly for a written charm and *hijab* in Egypt. In Iran, India, and the Ottoman Empire, the term *muhr*, which is also used for a coin or for a clay tablet composed of the earth of a sacred place and often invested with curative or amuletic purposes (Venzlaff 1995), is often employed. An amulet can be defined as an object generally worn for protection and most often made from a durable material such as a metal or a hard-stone. Amulet can also be applied to paper examples, although "talisman" is often used to describe these less robust and usually individualized forms.

It is on amulets that we find the widest range of elements from the "magical vocabulary." The principal element is the use of the Qur'an, either complete texts which include the Throne Verse (Q2: 255–256) or entire chapters such as *al-mu'awidhatan* (Q113 and Q114). The "names of God" form the next most prevalent element. Also encountered on amulets are magic squares, sometimes composed of the "mysterious letters of the Qur'an" or the "names of God" written with letters translated into numerals through the use of the *abjad* alphabet. The fact that so much of the Qur'an is present on amulets has led Hamès to describe the Qur'an as "a vast reservoir that can be channeled to satisfy every human need" (Hamès 2001: 95).

In the Islamic lands, the amulet will generally be made from metal or a semi-precious stone (e.g., carnelian, chalcedony), to be worn about the person or placed in the home. The stone itself will often have particular properties, some of

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them medicinal, or carry other associations. A hadith of the Prophet Muhammad stated, "The one who wears a carnelian ring will always know divine favour and happiness" (Inizan, Jazmin, and Mermier 1992: 157). This then accounts for the pre-eminence of carnelian (*ʿaqiq*) among the stones for both seals and amulets. Some properties attributed to carnelian include its ability to control fear in times of battle, to stop hemorrhage through its red color, and its ability to remove tooth decay if rubbed against the teeth (al-Tifaschi 1998: 222). Al-Biruni (d. 1048) mentions that the Turks believed that jade (*yashm*) – which with its varieties was a particularly popular material for making seals and amulets in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries – averted the evil eye, a belief he considered nonsense although he had been persuaded that it could mediate the after-effects of lightning (al-Biruni 2007: 171).

In Iran silver predominated in the eighteenth and nineteen centuries for the use of amulets. When writing on an amulet made of paper or other materials, the medium, such as the type of ink, used to inscribe it could also be important. In the Hadramawt in Yemen, for example, amulets known as *sarf* (made now from paper but originally pebbles) were painted with "dragon's blood" or resin; once the text became worn, the amulets would lose their efficacy (Rodionov 2010: 295). Such amulets were believed to keep their strength as long as the integrity of the inscription and the amulet itself were not compromised.

Paper amulets were either handwritten or block printed, and sometimes stamped with seals. These were often stored within an amulet case that could be made of silver (in Yemen, Oman, Iran, for example) or lead (associated with medieval Spain), or, as in West Africa and elsewhere, they were sewn into clothes and the recipient of the amulet forbidden from opening it (Epelboin *et al.* 2013: 8; Frembgen and Porter 2010: 204; Ibrahim 1987; Savage-Smith 1997: 132ff; Tanavoli n.d.). Early survivals of handwritten examples can be found among the *Geniza* documents, which are a collection of some 300 000 fragments of Jewish manuscripts found in the storehouse of the Ben Ezra Synagogue in the Fustat area of Cairo (Wasserstrom 1992: 163). These include fragments of Judaeo-Arabic (Arabic in Hebrew script) versions of Arabic magical texts, highlighting the complex interaction between Jewish and Muslim traditions in the early Islamic period. Excavations at medieval Quseir on the Red Sea have yielded amulets made of paper and cloth (Regourd and Handley 2009: 144), some revealing how Qurʾanic verses and magical signs were deployed together (Guo 2004:312), combinations still seen on modern amulets. The use of block printing for amulets, known as *tarsh*, seems to have been particularly prevalent in Egypt between the ninth to tenth centuries and the mid-fourteenth century. These paper amulets appear in a range of calligraphic styles from Kufic to cursive scripts (Bulliet 1987; D'Ottone 2013; Schaffer 2006). Two virtually identical examples dating to about the tenth century combine verses from the Qurʾan and invocations to God in a simple Kufic script (D'Ottone 2013; Regourd 2007: 130); later *tarsh* are in cursive scripts. Although there are some exceptions, these block-printed amulets do not tend to

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include any elements of the magical vocabulary in addition to the text, in clear contrast to the later handwritten examples which mix signs and symbols with texts – Qur'anic or otherwise (Bulliet 1987: 437; Schaffer 2006: 194).

In the eighteenth to nineteenth century, there was a proliferation of printed paper amulets from different parts of the Islamic world. Examples from the Ottoman domains encompass a wide range of elements including stamps probably made from metal seals and impressed in red and black inks. In one group, the stamps include holy buildings such as the Maqam Ibrahim at Mecca, verses from the Qur'an, invocations to God, and revered figures including the ancient Prophets. Another group consists entirely of elements such as the "Seven Signs" or magic squares, derived from the "magical vocabulary" (Perk 2010: 9–19).

The question of whether these paper amulets were intended to be "read" in the traditional sense must to some extent have depended on what the maker instructed the new owner, while matters of literacy also come into play here. As we saw in the West African example, mentioned above (Epelboin *et al.* 2013: 8), the recipient of the amulet was forbidden from opening it. While some texts are deliberately obfuscatory, others are so clearly written that it suggests they could have been used as a basis for incantations. In addition, printed amulets raise other questions about whether, once printed and sold, the paper amulets need to go through the hands of a "man of magic" to become "activated."[39]

The existence of the amulet seal is not an innovation of the Ottoman period but has a long history. Early Islamic examples of amulet seals are ring stones engraved with benedictory texts in reverse with no owner's name – and they confer protection on the wearer as well as on the object being stamped. An interesting example, from about the ninth century, is an amulet seal inscribed *tubna lillah* (we have repented unto God) set into a Carolingian mount (Porter and Ager 1999). Some of these amulet seals, particularly in rock crystal, are engraved with "Linear Kufic," strings of Kufic style letters with no obvious meaning. What material these were to be stamped on, if at all, is unclear. It may be that the fact of being inscribed in reverse simply gave them a mysterious magical quality (Kalus 1987; Porter 2010; Rehatsek 1880).

The amulet – as seen from the Ottoman examples – is not always engraved in positive but can in fact be in negative with the intention of stamping onto something and can therefore be considered a seal. The seal itself in this case was not believed to hold the power, this lay entirely in the object, the paper support that had been stamped. The conjunction of seal and the amulet goes even further in the Ottoman era with the frequent appearance in prayer books and talismanic shirts of seal designs. As remarked upon by Christiane Gruber,

> From books to shirts … the seal was thus transformed from a material object to a graphic sign applied to a variety of flat surfaces, where it came to function as a protective and curative device. Whether worn on the body or else carried in the

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> hand, seals were interacted with in highly tactilic ways, and it is precisely through physical engagements that the power of seal designs was believed to be activated by their Ottoman viewers and carriers. (Gruber 2013: 3–4)

The amulet–seal connection in the Ottoman period is yet further emphasized by the graphic appearance of the "Seal of Prophecy" (*muhr al-nubuwwa*), a physical mark on the Prophet's shoulder blades, the words of which are included in the text known as the *hilya*, a celebrated description of the Prophet's appearance and qualities, of which there are many Ottoman examples in the form of amulets and on paper (Porter 2011: 161 no. A100). Illustrations of the "Seal of Prophecy" in prayer books include examples of where the reader is encouraged to touch the design in order "activate" its qualities (Savage-Smith 1997: 106, 116–117). This is the same with the "Sandal of the Prophet" (*naʿn al-nabi*) also "activated" by touching. In a drawing of the sandal on a hajj certificate, made for a certain woman called Maymuna in 1433, the text around it says "I rub the image of the sandal to seek the Prophet's approval" (Flood 2014: 478). Another important seal in this regard is the "Great Seal of God," also illustrated in Ottoman prayer books, where the central part contains repetitions of Allah and around the side are the names of the Archangels. In one example from a manuscript dated 1289/1872 in the New York Public Library, the accompanying text includes the phrase "Whoever reads this blessed great seal or carries it with himself or rubs it against his face in the evening and morning will be forgiven seventy years of sin" (Gruber 2013: 5).

Regional Variations of Amulets

Certain types of amulets are characteristic of particular regions: In medieval Spain, for example, lead amulets engraved with Kufic script were folded inside amulet holders (Ibrahim 1987). During the late Ottoman period there is a rise in popularity of thin gold amulets known as *maskeh*.[40] These are characterized by being similar to coins in that they are stamped with dies, sometimes the same one on both sides. Extant examples are occasionally pierced, indicating that they were sewn onto clothing. The texts include invocations to God (as God wills and so on) the "names of God," the names of the Seven Sleepers and their dog, and the aforementioned description of the Prophet Muhammad known as the *hilya* (Porter 2011: 158–163). Also striking at this period is that many of the designs on the amulets appear in other contexts: including on talismanic shirts and prayer books (Gruber 2013).

A major difficulty in the study of amulets is that many of the texts inscribed upon them are so generic that it is not always self-evident in which part of the Dar al-Islam such an amulet might have been made. The context of the acquisition of the amulet or particular characteristics within the text of the inscription itself can therefore be the key. Some amulets have clear references to Twelver Shiʿism

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which, during the Safavid period (1501–1722), became the official religion of Iran. The specific Shiʿi vocabulary on amulets (and indeed coins, seals, and other objects as well) consist of the names of the "Five Pure" ones: Muhammad, his son-in-law ʿAli, his daughter Fatima, and his grandsons Hasan and Husayn[41] as well as the Twelve Imams, sometimes including their attributes, who with the addition of Fatima and Muhammad are referred to as the Fourteen Immaculate Ones. Another is the phrase that is the invocation to Imam ʿAli known as the Nadi ʿAliyan (Call upon ʿAli). Although part of a longer poem, the passage that is most frequently represented is "Call upon ʿAli, manifestor of miracles, you will find him a help to you in adversity, all care and grief will clear away through your friendship, Oh ʿAli, Oh ʿAli, Oh ʿAli" (Shani 2012: 138–139). A third text, "there is no youth (*fata*) except ʿAli and no sword except for Dhuʾl Faqar," refers to the split-pointed sword of ʿAli given to him by the Prophet at the battle of Badr, which itself was believed to have "magical" properties. Sometimes the sword is graphically represented, and these elements might either appear alone or complemented by Qurʾanic inscriptions (*EI*² art. Dhu'l Faqar). Particularly favored among the Shiʿa are the last two *sura*s, the *muʾawadatan* (Q113 and Q114) as there was a tradition that Imam Husayn apparently wore these two *suras* around his neck before he was martyred.

However, since ʿAli is revered by both Sunnis and Shiʿis, the presence of these elements alone does not indicate sectarian affiliation (Blair 2001: 90–91). In fact, there can be Sunni or Sufi associations as well. A document published by Perk includes stamps from amulets which include hands inscribed with verses from the Qurʾan, names of God, the Four Caliphs, and the Dhu'l Faqar text. These are contiguous to stamps which refer to the Sufi Qadiri and Rifaʿi orders (Bernheimer 2013; Perk 2010: 112–113).

An interesting question posed by Ziza Vesel in her analysis of Iranian figural seals is whether it is possible to define such objects as Shiʿi when overt sectarian elements are not present. Two particular groups of amulets were being made in Iran in the past two centuries: One group is silver amulets in the form of body parts known as *nazar* (from the Arabic root to look or gaze upon) made for healing. They are cut from sheets of silver and often sold near shrines to place upon the door or grille of a shrine (Vesel 2012). Another group is cut from sheet brass and combines figural representation with elements of the "magical vocabulary." Vesel links the presence of such figures to ancient Sabaean magic, picked up by a number of writers in the early Islamic period. These included magical practices using astrology, which are to be found in the literary tradition in texts such as *Telesm Eskandariyye* (*The Talismans of Alexander*) and in the iconography of the amulets themselves (Ikhwan al-Safaʾ 2011: 116–146; Vesel 2012: 258). The function often dictates the iconography. There are amulets dedicated to love which include representations of the famous lovers Yusuf and Zulayka, entwined figures, a fish, and also an amulet known as "the gate of love" (*bab al-hubb*) (Vesel 2012: 261–266). In each case the figure is surrounded by signs and symbols.

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Magic Medicinal Bowls

Magic healing bowls were produced in the Islamic world in considerable quantity from at least the twelfth century (Figure 21.8), though they are not found in the written magical literature. In origin they were probably related in some fashion to pre-Islamic Aramaic magic bowls, even though there are in fact great differences in design and function (Naveh and Shaked 1985). The latter are of clay and have spiral inscriptions invoking demons, while the Islamic ones are of metal and noticeably lacking in any reliance upon *jinn* and demons. While for the most part these bowls are made of metal, a clay example painted with ink from the Abbasid site of Samarra[42] shows evidence of continuity with pre-Islamic tradition, and examples have also been found at Susa (Joel and Peli 2005: 94–111). Islamic magic medicinal bowls are distinct among magical artifacts for a number of reasons: (a) they were not carried or worn by the sufferer (hence not an amulet); (b) they do not function continuously, as a household amulet would; (c) they were employed only when needed, yet they were of a lasting material; and (d) the early examples are far more informative as to their intended use than any other magical artifact, for the early (twelfth–fourteenth century) examples are engraved with statements giving specific therapeutic uses. In addition to Qur'anic verses and magical writing, the early bowls were decorated with schematically rendered

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FIGURE 21.8 Magic medicinal bowl. Syria dated 565 (1169–1170). Height: 7.5 cm; Diameter: 19.0 cm. Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art (MTW 1443). Source: © Nour Foundation. Courtesy of the Khalili Family Trust.

human and animal forms. A subgroup always has representations of a scorpion, a snake (or serpent), an animal that is probably intended to be a dog (though some have called it a lion), and two intertwined pre-Mongol dragons – imagery reminiscent of the design on ninth–tenth-century Iranian amulets. This subgroup has been designated by some scholars as "poison cups," though in fact poisons and animal bites are only some of the many uses inscribed on the outside of the dish (Canaan 1936; Savage-Smith 1997: 72–105; 2003).

Talismanic Shirts

Another type of magical equipment with no counterpart in the primary written sources is the magic shirt, made of cloth and painted with magical symbols and verses from the Qur'an (Figure 21.9). The earliest preserved examples are from

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FIGURE 21.9 Talismanic shirt with Qur'anic inscriptions, the phrase "There is no youth except ʿAli, no sword but Dhu'l Faqar," groups of letters and numbers, and depictions of the sanctuaries of Mecca and Medina. Probably Deccan sixteenth–seventeenth centuries. Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art (TXT 0471)). Source: © Nour Foundation. Courtesy of the Khalili Family Trust.

the fifteenth century or later and were made in the Ottoman Empire, Safavid Iran, or Mughal India. While the recorded examples preserved today are relatively recent, there was a tradition traceable to the ninth century of wearing a special shirt for curing fevers or aiding childbirth (Savage-Smith 1997: 117–123; Tezcan 2011). A remarkable Judeo-Persian talismanic textile, recently published in detail by Raya Shani, though also of recent date nonetheless reflects an ancient magical tradition traceable to Mesopotamia and moderated through Jewish and Muslim communities (Shani 1999).

The Ottoman examples are the most magnificent and elaborate, employing Latin squares and Qur'anic verse combined with calligraphic motifs and illuminated lozenges reminiscent of ornate manuscripts. The Safavid shirts are of a different cut and design, with Shi'i prayers and the names of the Twelve Imams written on them. While they display a more limited use of color, they often bear numerous magic squares of various types. The Mughal and Deccani talismanic shirts (Figure 21.9) are distinguished from all others by the fact that there are no magic squares, instead they generally include all 114 *sura*s of the Qur'an, in addition to the "names of God" and the *shahada*. A fourth type of Islamic talismanic garment is represented by two items of relatively recent date: a set of undergarments made in Senegal and a sleeveless flared tunic made in Nigeria (Epelboin *et al.* 2013; Hamès and Epelboin 1992; Picton and Mack 1989).

Mirrors

Mirrors have a long history of association with magical properties (Ullmann 1992: 55–61). The shiny surface may have become associated with the arts of crystal gazing in which any reflective surface such as water or ink could be used. A number of medieval Iranian mirrors are preserved, usually from the late twelfth or thirteenth century, on which talismanic designs have been engraved upon the shiny surface (Savage Smith 1997: 128, no. 52). There is no relationship in terms of design between the two faces of these mirrors. Some of the symbols may have been placed after the mirror lost its shiny surface, in other cases the motifs are integral to the original construction of the mirror (Savage-Smith 1997: 124–131).

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Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that beliefs in magic were widespread throughout the medieval Islamic world and later on, permeating societies at all levels. This resulted not only in a body of literature in which a wide variety of practices was described and debated but also in the development of a particular vocabulary of motifs found on objects ranging from the simple paper amulet of an everyday nature to the luxurious talismanic shirt made for a sultan.

Notes

1 In Wahhabi contexts, for example, magical practices are banned, while in West Africa and parts of Egypt the practices are widespread. See Kruk 2005.
2 van Bladel 2009:101–102, 114; Burnett 1989; Burnett 1996: 167–169.
3 London, British Library, Delhi Arabic MS 1946.
4 Delhi Arabic 1946, fols 121v–122r, fols. 133v–134r.
5 Fierro 1996; de Callataÿ and Mo 2016.
6 Ibn Abī Uṣaibi 1996: 1, 301–302.
7 Hajji Khalīfa, *Kashf al-Ẓunūn ʿan asmāʾ al-kutub wa al-funūn*, 2 vols, Beirut n.d., vol 1, 902.
8 Fierro 1996: 906–944.
9 Tewfik Canaan suggested that the basic principle of the "lunette script" is that numbers which are 10 and over receive one or more "lunettes" to increase their numerical value. For example, 10–90 have one lunette, numbers 100–900 have two lunettes (Canaan 1937–1938: 141–143). See also the discussions in Doutté 1909, Forrest 2001, and Porter 2011: 173ff.
10 Pseudo-Majriti 1933, p. 233; Delhi Arabic 1946, fols 41r–42v.
11 Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ 2011: 5–10.
12 Istanbul, Atıf Efendi, no. 1681, fols 572v–576r; Manisa, National Library, no. 1461, 18v–5v.
13 Istanbul, Süleymaniye Library, Fazıl Ahmad, PS 870; fols 334v–337r; Delhi Arabic 1946, fols 21v–32r.
14 Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ, *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity: An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistles 1–2*, ed. Nader El-Bizri (Oxford: Oxford University Press/Institute of Ismaili Studies), p. 143.
15 London, British Library, Delhi Arabic MS 1948, fol 76v, fol. 78r, fol. 94r.
16 Delhi Arabic MS 1948, fols 84v–94r, fols 134r–159v.
17 London, SOAS, 46347, fol. 70r.
18 London, SOAS, 46347, 116v–117r; Delhi Arabic MS 1948, fols 170r–202v.
19 Hajji Khalīfa, *Kashf al-Ẓunūn*, vol. 2, 1024.
20 Hajji Khalīfa, *Kashf al-Ẓunūn*, vol. 2, 989–990; Ibn Khaldūn 2000: 485.
21 Al-Buni was from Ifriqiya, which refers to the area that comprises Tunisia, western Libya, and eastern Algeria. Gardiner 2012: 86–88, 2014: 75; Francis 2005: 97–99.
22 Gardiner 2012 92; Francis 2005: 98–99.
23 Gardiner 2012: 96–98; Coloun 2013: 2, 447–512; Gril 1989; Lory 2004, 1996; Garrido-Clemente 2010; Melvin-Koushki 2012.
24 Hamadan 1985; Lory 1986.
25 Gardiner 2014: 75–76, 88–91.
26 Gardiner 2012: 102; Gardiner 2014: 6, 20, 27–30; Coloun 2013: 480–484.
27 Gardiner 2012: 96, 102–103. The authenticity of *Shams al-maʿārif wa laṭāʾif al-ʿawārif* has been the subject of debate in the theses of Gardiner and Coloun. However, both *Shams al-maʿārif wa laṭāʾif al-ʿawārif* and the later compilation (*Shams al-maʿārif al-Kubrā*) were widely copied and printed, and also most recognizable and influential even on a popular level, and thus they both warrant exploration as texts representative of the ideas and practices discussed in this article.

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28 Hamès 2007, passim.
29 Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), MS Arabe 2647, fol. 2r, fols. 4v–6r.
30 Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), MS Arabe 2647, fols 13r–17r.
31 Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), MS Arabe 2647, fols 20r–20v.
32 Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), MS Arabe 2647, fols 53r–54v.
33 Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), MS Arabe 2647, fol. 34v, fol. 18r, fol. 25r.
34 Paris, BnF MS Arabe 2647, pp. 15–17.
35 For several examples of ninth- and tenth-century wooden and bone amulets and spoon handles from Iran with images of this kind, see Savage-Smith 1997: 135–137.
36 The *subha* (rosary), which has 99 beads divided into three groups of 33, is used by Muslims to meditate on the names in their prayers. The names fall into a number of groups, and the usual order starts with the first 14 from Allah to al-Musawwir, which are enumerated in Qurʾan 59: 22–44. Then follow names which are grouped according to euphony or use of different Arabic roots to express different, sometimes opposite, meanings.
37 The mysterious letters of the Qurʾan and where they appear are as follows: alr, q 10, 11, 12, 14, 15; alm, q 2, 3, 29, 30, 31, 32; almr, q 13; almṣ, q 7; ḥm, q 40, 41, 43, 44, 45, 46; ḥmʿsq, q 42; ṣ, q 38; ṭs, q 27; ṭsm, q 26, 28; ṭh, q 20; q, q 50; khyʿṣ, q 19; n, q 68; ys, q 36.
38 For a discussion of how the term entered the English language, for example, see Warner 2012: 216. For other terms see Canaan 1937–1938: 69.
39 This is discussed in D'Ottone 2013: 70 and Hirschler 2012: 16.
40 From the Arabic verb *masaka*, to hold. Canaan attributes this to the belief that the *maskeh* "holds the foetus of the pregnant woman in situ, i.e. that such amulets prevent abortion" (Canaan 1937–1938: 70).
41 Also known as the *panj tan*, or *ahl al-bayt*, the people of the house (Kalus 1981: 71; Tanavoli n.d.: 84ff)
42 British Museum OA+.1181.a

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